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Stereotypes are an inherent part of the way in which people learn. They narrow one's perception of what is real, and are often difficult to let go of once accepted. One of the major problems one has to face in investigating history is the fact that literature and much recorded evidence is based on, and hence strengthens, these stereotypes. Authors who write novels with a historical basis continually battle stereotypes in their works. The author faces the challenge of getting the audience to unlearn what they already know, and relearn the same material via the author's viewpoint. Such is the case in the following novels: *Lincoln* by Gore Vidal, *Ragtime* by E. L. Doctorow, and *The Robber Bridegroom* by Eudora Welty. In these three novels the author opposes the normal way of reading history, the way of the stereotype. The material presented is popularly viewed in a two-dimensional fashion. However, the author provides the reader with a third dimension, by introducing people and situations which we would never expect to have entered a particular time or place in history. This information which the author provides is pertinent to the characters and their time period, whereby the true essence of the material being discussed is learned.

In history, President Abraham Lincoln is a cherished figure, worthy of great respect and admiration. Gore Vidal takes great care to demolish this exalted view of Lincoln. "Mr. Vidal managed to work in everything unsavory that is known about the Great Emancipator."[1] Credited with freeing the slaves and recementing the Union after the Civil War, history puts him on a pedestal as a man of impeccable moral fiber. The public generally views him as somber, stately, conscientious, greatly respected, and restrained. The real Lincoln as told by Vidal was far from this. "So mythologized has Lincoln become over the decades, it is startling to learn that . . . fellow politicians considered him too uninformed, inept and naive to handle his office."[2] Lincoln hardly commanded respect from even some members of his own cabinet.

Vidal writes the novel from a third person semi-omniscient perspective. The reader knows not what Lincoln thinks for, "we are never privy to his thoughts . . . but by degrees we come to know him well through the eyes of his witnesses."[3] Vidal purposely does this to allow the reader to understand how men close to Lincoln, like Seward, Chase, and Hernondon, view him. By utilizing such a point of view, Vidal goes one step further in representing Lincoln holistically. In effect, *Lincoln* is not a novel dedicated to a one-sided analysis of Lincoln's life during his presidency,

but rather a tapestry of different people's views of him, via their interpretations of the man. This technique presents both the good and the bad, allowing for a greater of revealing the truth. By employing this strategy, Vidal helps the reader understand what visions of history precede the stereotypes of Lincoln.

The life of Lincoln is popularly regarded as the struggle of a poor, conscientious man who rose to greatness through morality, and hard work. Vidal deems it essential in revealing Lincoln's full character to point out the little known incidents considered very questionable by today's moral standards. "The log cabin, rail-splitting legend is debunked. Billy Hernondon . . . talks about Lincoln's whoring adventures as well as the likelihood of him picking up an infection along the way."[4] Vidal wishes to portray Lincoln's other half in a satirical manner. The prostitute says, "Mr. Lincoln, you are.the most conscientious man I ever saw"[5] when responding to Lincoln's refusal to go on credit for paying the prostitute. Lincoln not only had sex with a prostitute, but by using a pretext of conscientiousness, he actually conned the prostitute into having sex with him for free. The paradox lies in the fact that Lincoln is portrayed as moral while engaged in an immoral action. However, one must remember even these stories may not be reliable, for they are stereotypical descriptions of a debunked Lincoln as portrayed by Vidal.

For one to say that the Civil War was fought over the question of slavery reflects a popularly held naive and narrow minded viewpoint. Historically speaking, slavery stands alongside many other issues in dispute, such as states' rights, and the South's continually diminishing role in the government. In the novel, "There are no illusions of a war fought to free the slaves, or of Lincoln's faith in a viable future for the Negro in American society."[6] Lincoln himself should not be considered an abolitionist. Vidal writes, "If I could preserve the Union by freeing all of the slaves everywhere, I would do so. If I could preserve the Union by freeing none of the slaves, I would do so. If I could preserve the Union by freeing some of the slaves, but not others, I would do so."[7] Here, Vidal introduces the reader to Lincoln's true reasons for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation which, were solely out of, "a military necessity."[8] The romanticized stereotype of Lincoln is challenged, and his role as merely a politician is enhanced.

Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves is popularly perceived as being driven by compassion and altruism. This is not the case. In the novel, Lincoln himself affirms the inferiority of the Negro, and fears the consequences of their freedom. Mr. Blair says to Lincoln,.".. I want every last Negro shipped off to Africa . . . The people . . . will find the money to transport them from this continent where they never should have been brought."[9] Lincoln responds by saying, "That's very eloquent . . . and much my own view."[10] The historical truth about the Emancipation Proclamation is that this doctrine was nothing more than a self-serving, power-building political move intended to get a message across to the Confederate states that the South is not out of President Lincoln's jurisdiction. "Lincoln's ambition, Douglas charges, is for greatness—whether at the expense of 'emancipating slaves

or enslaving free men'."[11] The North had no slaves and existing slave states in the Union were allowed to keep their slaves. The Emancipation Proclamation was a law with no real substance designed only to remind the South of the fact that Lincoln still remained in charge of the Union. "I do not recognize any dissolution"[12] is what Lincoln says to demonstrate that in his eyes the Confederacy did not exist.

In the last part of the book where Hay and Mr. Schuyler discuss Lincoln and his greatness, Hay comments that Lincoln is undoubtedly the greatest President for, "... he not only put the Union back together again, but he made an entirely new country and all of it in his own image." [13] This quote, if interpreted one way is very damaging to Lincoln's reputation. By saying "in his own image," the author makes a biblical reference to God's creation of man in his own image. On a similar note, Lincoln thought that he had to die as atonement for all the bloodshed he had created. This statement raises the question of whether Lincoln saw himself as a Christ-figure. Vidal's portrayal parallels Christian theology in that Christ's death allowed him to take upon himself the sins of mankind.

Another novel which actively disregards the way of the stereotype is *Ragtime* by L. Doctorow. Set in the early twentieth century, before the United States' entry into World War I, this time period is generally viewed as less important than its neighboring time periods, the politics of the Gilded Age and the war. The most important domestic problem is the wave of immigrants chasing promises of a better life. In his novel, Doctorow battles the perception of America as a land of opportunity. "Doctorow has found a fresh way to orchestrate the themes of American innocence, energy, and inchoate ambition with their antiphonies of complacency, disorder and disillusion."[14] It has been said that when the immigrants came to America, they were expecting streets paved with gold, but found that not only were they not paved with gold, but they, themselves, had to pave them.

By using Tateh and his daughter as examples of typical immigrants, Doctorow displays the filth, the hardships and the pain of the immigrant lifestyle, and the realization of shattered dreams. Doctorow writes, "One day with two weeks' rent due she let the man have his way on a cutting table. He kissed her face and tasted the salt of her tears."[15] In order to keep the apartment, a mother and wife must desecrate herself to the fullest. Doctorow writes about an America that was a, "world of simplicity and optimism at the turn of the century and the weary corrupt decadence in which the century is now wearing itself out."[16] For most, the American dream was just that, a dream, which quickly turned into a nightmare.

The flood of immigrants caused great problems in urban centers. Textbooks teach us that major social reform programs were instituted, and that they were highly effective in dealing with the problems of overcrowding, poverty, and hunger. The outcome of such reform programs is generally viewed as very effective, changing urban life in a positive way. But the truth is that there were many urban centers untouched by reform, and unless one lived that sort of life, they would be

blind to its very existence. Doctorow illustrates this point perfectly when he writes, "There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants"[17] then says, "Apparently there were Negroes. There were immigrants."[18] The public is conveniently blind to the dilemmas of the poor. Doctorow introduces characters such as J.P. Morgan to show the horrible inequities of wealth by demonstrating how the rich became richer as the poor became poorer.

The characters themselves represent stereotypes in the novel. The one family is composed of characters named Mother, Father, and Mother's younger brother and are always referred to as just that. In the novel, "Doctorow builds characters without once moving beyond their observable surfaces."[19] By maintaining only this observable surface Doctorow pokes fun at the stereotypical view of history. By not naming the characters, the question arises as to whether or not Doctorow can assign these characters an identity, or merely allow them to function as instruments of reflection for their social class as a whole. Doctorow questions our sensibilities as to whether or not the reader can accept the blandness of the family as the stereotypical blandness of the middle class during this era.

The family appears to be relatively well-off and lives independent of the slum world of Tateh. Doctorow wishes to accentuate the problems associated with stereotypes by adding certain elements to this family's life to demonstrate that these people have an independent life outside the confines of their social class. So in essence, Doctorow gives the family a pulse to show that they are unique while at the same time mocking the dullness of the stereotype. Doctorow himself said that, "I've just twisted that around and written about the imaginary events in the lives of undisguised people."[20] One can safely assume that these characters wear no disguises because their lives are explicitly discussed. Although, Doctorow does add a little makeup. Doctorow accomplishes this task by introducing Coalhouse Walker's relationship with the family through Sarah and her baby. He also adds to the complexity of the situation by describing Younger Brother's newfound calling in life as an explosions expert to battle for a cause where he feels he belongs.

The element of fantasy is used to oppose stereotypes in the literary masterpiece *The Robber Bridegroom* by Eudora Welty. The novel is set in colonial southern America, mainly on the large plantation of Clement Musgrove. Here lies the heart of the Southern stereotype, where a code of chivalry guided all men. Welty totally shatters this view by introducing the disease of the era early on in the novel, namely the thieves, and murderers, such as Mike Fink and, more importantly, Jamie Lockhart. "He stopped and laid her on the ground, where straight below, the river flowed as slow as sand, and robbed her of that which he had left her the day before."[21] Here Welty describes Rosamond's rape by Jamie Lockhart.

The Robber Bridegroom is interpreted by some as almost a fairy-tale novel, similar to that of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. "In *The Robber Bridegroom* are characters whose roles are taken from legend . . . Clement Musgrove, the innocent kind father, Salome is the wicked stepmother, and Jamie Lockhart the robber bride-

groom, is the prince harming." [22] Welty wishes to prove a point here. In the novel she uses storybook format, hence the novel is more intended for enjoyment rather than for educational purposes. But Welty's style questions why this novel should be less believable than another for they both contain elements of twisted history. One is regarded as fiction while another novel with a smaller connection with fantasy can be regarded as historical literature. If this particular novel is a fantasy then all literature with historical bases should also be considered fantasies, for the believability and reliability of both should be equal.

Welty further points out the problem of preconceived perceptions by pursuing the notion of duality. Duality is one of the most important factors responsible for much of the action in the plot. "Clement learns that there is a fundamental 'duality' in nature, that if he kills the famous robber Jamie Lockhart he also kills his daughter's bridegroom."[23] Eudora Welty feels it is important to portray to the reader that something can never be viewed two dimensionally, for everything has two faces. One side is readily observed, while the other is noticeable only if we dig a little bit deeper. The face one easily sees can represent the stereotype, and the second face which one encounters is the truth behind it. "Up she got and away she crept, and made up the brew which would wipe away the stains . . . . Lo and behold, the brew worked."[24] Rosamond must look past the blemishes, which symbolically represent stereotypes, to reveal the truth about Lockhart.

The characters of Eudora Welty tend not to be mundane people with common personalities. Salome is not the typical lady of the plantation, who is supposed to be like a right hand to her husband. Salome is greedy and envies her stepdaughter. When the Native Americans choose Rosamond to sacrifice as a beautiful girl, Salome yells, "'What beautiful girl are you looking for? I am the most beautiful!' For she was jealous even of not being chosen the victim."[25] Rosamond herself is also not an upright southern belle. She lies and her actions are guided by passion and lust for the criminal Lockhart. "Eudora Welty is concerned with time and place, of course, because they reveal character," however, "character is not one dimensional; it is not limited to what a given environment can produce or even a single lifetime can formulate."[26] Welty wishes to state that characters should not be viewed by their general time period. Stereotypes develop because too often one thinks that only the factors of time and place govern someone.

Characterization is simply one of the methods Welty uses to break the confines of stereotypes. Welty says, "It used to be that it didn't have very far to go to get maybe something that was easier to see, but now there are so many layers of life, so many blurrings, so many homogeneous things together that you have to send a taproot down perhaps deeper."[27] The characters are not indicative of their stereotypical perception at all. Clement Musgrove, a successful self-made planter is a naive, soft-spoken gentleman, rather than a rough and tough backwoodsman and not at all soldier-like. By purposely making her characters complex, she forces

the reader to look past whatever knowledge they have of the people of the time period and view them through Welty's eyes as more than a facsimile of an era.

In conclusion, one can see how these three authors tackle the problem of stereotypes relating to the characters and time periods about which they write. In Lincoln Gore, Vidal manages to expose elements in Lincoln's life which not many are aware of. In *Ragtime* by E. L. Doctorow, the stereotypes relating to the time period are mocked and the author manages to give characters their own life independent of the traditional view of uniformity. In *The Robber Bridegroom* by Eudora Welty, the time period itself and the manner of telling the story as a fantasy serves to question the reader's sensibilities as to what is believable. All three books not only successfully oppose stereotypes but also allow the reader to understand what visions of history precede the depiction of all these stereotypes.

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